

1.

JAKUB PETRI

The Making of Relational Space in Japanese Music Project's Audio-Visual Performances

„The music of Shamisen has something of the nebulous, of the indefinite, of the unequal [...] „no lights, only flashes!”

Kuki Shūzō , *Considerations on Time*

1. The matter of time

It is a fact of belief that generally speaking, music in Japan has rather been not a subject of a metaphysical reflection. It is worth to mention a statement of a famous Japanese philosopher Kuki Shūzō in that matter: “*There is not much to write about Japanese music [...] It is difficult to speak about music in an abstract manner*”.

It is striking however, that Kuki, instead of keeping the silence, gives us some interesting philosophical reflections about music. In an essay entitled “*Considerations on Time*”, the Japanese philosopher describes music as a medium connected with a notion of time. Kuki’s notion of time is although far from the one which seems to be familiar to us. It’s not that acquainted, linear time that tacts our daily routine and can be measured by mechanical devices like clock. Kuki characterizes time as fluid and countinous. In philosophical terms we can speak

about an opposition between quantitative time (our daily mode) and qualitative time (Kuki's mode). How does it relate to music?

Michael Marra, an author of an essay on Kuki Shūzō's poetry and poetics, gives us a simple answer: for Kuki, "*Like poetry, Japanese music mean a liberation from a measurable time*"¹. Kuki himself, wrote an essay entitled "The expression of Infinite in Japanese Art", where he states, that Japanese arts in general art devoting their technique to destroy the perspective of time and space.² It is expected from an artist that he should switch his perspective from geometrical mode to a metaphysical one.

2. Music as a pure performance

The attitude presented by Kuki, may be a little awkward for most of us, Western listeners, for whom the context of sound is so important. Following the already mentioned by Marra, "liberation from a measurable time" postulate, leads us close to the category of a pure sound performance, far away from melodic structures and idea of composition. Kuki idea of sound seems to correspond with his general philosophical standpoint, founded on the specific notion of a category of "emptiness". In spite of a strong interest in European phenomenology, Kuki defined his philosophy in accordance with Japanese philosophical tradition, which he perceived as deriving from Hinduistic thought and Chinese pantheism. For Kuki, one of the most important of Japanese aesthetic ideals was to express the infinite in the finite form. This, however did not implicate the transcendent understanding of art.

It is important to mention, that a practice of art as a mode of transcendence which was so popular in a Western paradigm, involved the special category of artifact. For a long time, the most important question for Western aestheticians was "what is the definition of work of art?". They simply needed to know how to define and produce forms. The idea of a form referring to a transcendent "outer world" was cor-

¹ Michael Marra, *Worlds in Tension: An Essay on Kuki Shūzō's Poetry and Poetics*, a foreword to Kuki Shūzō, *A Philosopher's Poetry and Poetics*, 2004, University of Hawaii Press, p.40

² Kuki Shūzō, *The Expression of Infinite in a Japanese Art*, w: idem, *The Journal of the History of Philosophy, Monography Series*, Illinois, 1987, p.57.

responding well with dualistic, western tradition of philosophy. Contrary, as Kuki states, the Japanese notion of the infinite was founded far from the paradigm of transcendence and provided a conviction that the infinite is, in a paradoxical way, immanent to the finite world.³ “*The infinite*” stated Kuki “*is everywhere: there where it is not, there is nothing*”⁴. That was the reason, for which for Kuki the performing of sound itself was so important. There is a huge difference between performing a melody in aim to evoke the impression of transcendence and performing sound in understanding that there is no difference between categories of “inner” and “outer”, no goal to be accomplished. Only the latter mode can be understood as following the buddhist postulate of “form without a form” during practicing the art.

What seems to be significant for such understood performing of sound is its decontextualization. It seems to be a good frame linking the mentioned before *shamisen* play and some modern performative disciplines. It is noticeable, that many of disciplines and activities of a performative character, tries to define themselves in isolation from their historical, traditional context. It is not a question of a pure negation of a context, rather of a limitation of its impact on a performed discipline. It's more about just performing, less about the notion and understanding. Let us explain:

- The movement can be performed (*as a body improvisation* for example) in a separation from a dance tradition
- The city space can be performed (as an *urban explorations*) in a separation from an architecture's tradition⁵
- And also the sound can be performed (as *noise music* or *electronic music*) in a separation from a music's tradition.

It is significant, that all mentioned examples, are incorporating a momentum of a turn back to a pure medium constitutive for each discipline.

- For *body improvisation* it is a movement
- For *urban explorations* it is a space
- For *noise and electronic music* it is a sound.

³ Kuki Shūzō, *The Expression of Infinite in a Japanese Art*, w: idem, *The Journal of the History of Philosophy, Monography Series*, Illinois, 1987, p.57

⁴ ibidem, p.52

⁵ *Urban explorations*, *Urbex* is a discipline of a performative character, which involves exploration of man-made structures, such as abandoned ruins or not usually seen components of the man-made environment.

3. *Noise*

A Polish *noise* music performer, Zbigniew Karkowski, who is a long time Japanese resident, states that noise literally is a music in the same sense as voodoo would be called a christianity. Karkowski describes *noise* as an activity growing beyond Western division on a music and ..noise (in a literal sense), the art and non-art. Karkowski mentions that Europeans are obsessed with theory and they usually tend to search for analogies. European needs to possess a knowledge about an artifact, to set it in the context of a tradition. He likes to work on art in a mode of continuance or opposition. Karkowski remarks that in Japanese paradigm this mode of work does not seem to be as popular as in Europe. The Polish composer describes this difference during his emotional interview for a *Neurobot Zine*:

"I like Japan for it is open for creativity. In Europe everyone talks about history and tradition. If I cut a piece of a country & western and paste it in a different context, people will start talking about the genealogy of what i did, < this was 100 years ago, and that 50 years ago, you know >. In Japan you will find more freedom, because Japanese tend to think about music in a different manner. For them it is a fetish. Once upon a time Europeans came to Africa on a christian mission and they have carried with them Jesus on a cross. They put it in a small village. Local community covered it with mud, animals blood and plants. Was it still a symbol of Christianity? No, it was a fetish. That describes the way how Japanese receive music. Noise for many of it's creators is not even a music, nor an art,"⁶

The already mentioned, Karkowski's controversial thesis, finds it's confirmation in words of Akita Masami aka Merzbow, one of well known pioneers of noise and electronic music who claims that: *„Japanese artists use noise simply as cathartic release without the philosophical underpinnings”⁷*

It is a paradox, because such a concentration put on a sound in itself, seems to be an expression of very refined philosophy rather

⁶ Karkowski Zbigniew, in: *Neurobot Zine*, <http://neurobot.art.pl/o3/wywiady/karkowski/karkowski.html>, last acces date: 21.02.2014

⁷ Woodward Bred, *Merzbook*, Extreme, 1999, p. 14

than lack of reflection. Akita Masami however also seems to be aware of that fact as he adds: „*Japanese noise relishes the ecstasy of sound itself and the concepts come from the sound. It is a tradition of an eastern philosophy to base theory on a real experience*”⁸

It is important to mention that “fetish” which has already been defined in a positive sense, for many XXth century researches was a plague of contemporary music. One of the prominent philosophers of that time, Theodore Adorno published an essay entitled “*On the Fetish – character in Music and the Regression of Listening*”, where he followed a relationship between the regression of listening and the process of fetishization of music. One of Adorno’s claims was similar to our earlier observations: contemporary music seems to loose it’s original context. The “cut&paste” culture of remix and sampling which sets standards for contemporary music productions seems to have it’s origins in the process described by Adorno. Today’s contemporary mass music is produced and listened in isolation from the context, it’s intended to be light and meaningless.

However, the lack of context is not a negative phenomenon itself, neiteher was for Adorno. What’s striking, Adorno was worried mainly about quality of music and quality of musical experience. What he calls as a “rejective listening” seems to mean an isolation from the consequences of sound, not the sound itself. Thus we still listen to music, but we reject the experince attached to it. What Adorno critisizes in fact is the whole “easy listening music” industry and culture.

There is a great remark, Adorno makes on Shoeneborg at the last page of his essay: “*The terror which Shoenberg and Webern spread, today as in the past, comes not from their incomprehensibility but from the fact that they are all to correctly understood. Their music gives form to that anxiety, that terror, that catastrophic situation that others merely evade by regressing*”⁹. In fact, both, following the “easy listening” culture or sticking to traditionally understood music,

⁸ Woodward Bred, *Merzbook*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁹ Adorno Theodore, *On the Fetish – character in Music and the Regression of Listening*, in: R. Leppert, ed., *Adorno. Essays on Music*, California 2002, p. 325

founded on an idea of composition seem to be an act of regression in listening in the light of modern experimental music performances.

If so, why Schoenberg's sound is so terrifying for Adorno? It seems the reason is, Schoenberg as an example of extreme, late modern movement in music, destroys the frame of experience, performs sound breaking the philosophical illusion of dualism, objectivity and subjectivity. This is the manifestation of one of those moments in modern culture when extreme forms of Modernism cut off their roots. What remains there, is a pure experiment, that means a rejection of tradition. Jean Francois Lyotard has described this process as one of the most important antinomies of the Modernism, thus it should be perceived as one of the most important of our contemporary culture antinomies.

The "terror", the term Adorno used to name the Schoenberg's music, seems to be a very appropriate word to name an activity of breaking customs, defining an aesthetic experience. In the same sense, we can understand Akita Masami as a "music terrorist" as he postulates a sound catalyzing cathartic release with no philosophy attached.¹⁰ What's more, Kuki Shūzō also spreads the "terror" as he is demanding to destroy a frame of perception. This is the way, that should be understood his motto of "liberation from time and space" in arts. And finally, the *shamisen* is a tool of the "terror" as it does not pleasure our ear but makes us anxious rather by its unequal, mysterious sound.

4. A Relational Space

If music can mean a liberation from linear, fluid time, can the sound correlated with visual effects mean a liberation from both, time and space? Little bit on the side of the Kuki Shūzō high standard's set for an aesthetic experience, we can safely say that a proper use of sound and light in audio-visual performances can generate an experience of a relative space. Which maybe does not establish a "*nirvana*" of musical experience, but makes the step in the right direction.

¹⁰ The connection between Schoenberg's experiments and modern noise and electroic music is a whole different story to be described in a separate paper. We will not discuss this matter here for this reason.

The concept of a relative space is enrooted in Japanese culture and finds its manifestation in a Japanese stone gardens perception for example, where not the garden frame itself is important but relations it generates are important. A world class Japanese architect Kurokawa Kishō, in his book entitled *Intercultural Architecture*, describes the relational space (*ma*), as a category essential for each Japanese. According to the author, *ma* can be described as a transitional space, which is based on dynamic oppositions. This understanding of space seems to derive from Lao Tsu concept of space that includes both “the inner” and “the outer”. Lao Tsu, has defined this kind of space in an architectural context in the eleventh chapter of *Tao Te Ching*, where he wrote:

“Thirty spokes share the wheel’s hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.”¹¹

Kurokawa Kishō, gives as an example of such understood space, an *engawa*. The *engawa* is a kind of Japanese, wooden veranda, that was used to be placed in a traditionally built house. It served to organize the space between house and a garden, thanks to application of a mobile screens, called *shōji*.¹² Kurokawa Kishō sums up the spatial consequences of *engawa* in the matter of *ma* as follows: “In a Chinese calligraphy, the space between signs is more important, than signs themselves [...] *Ma* does not force opposing elements into compromise or harmony, but provides the key to their living symbiosis.”¹³ This corresponds great with a way, the mentioned already before, Ching-yu Chang defines the space of a traditional, Japanese, stone

¹¹ Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, <http://www.wussu.com/laotzu/index.htm> last access date: 26.02.2014

¹² *Shōji* was directly a screen between the garden and the house.

¹³ Kurokawa Kishō, *The Philosophy of Symbiosis*, Washington, 1999, p.109

garden: “*He who sees, see the stones, he who perceives, sees a space between stones*”.¹⁴ The mode of perception seems to follow the same logic as the one proposed by Kuki Shūzō in the context of *shamisen* music. “*No lights, just flashes!*” stressed Kuki. It is however striking, that speaking of music, the Japanese philosopher uses the metaphor of a “flash” in it’s spatial context.¹⁵

The difference between a “flash” and “light”, is that a flash is sudden, short, dynamic and rapid, whereas light can be defined as a something constant and static rather. Thus, the “flash” generates the switch; it is the factor that allows things covered in darkness to be seen for a while but in another moment those things are hidden back again. And finally, we usually tend to believe that casual “light” let us see things “as they really are”, whereas we can not be sure of the nature of the things revealed by a sudden flash in a darkness. What we experience then, can be described as a play of relations rather than an object of perception. However it is important to remember that in a philosophical paradigm founded on concepts coming from hindhuism and buddhism, with very specific sub categories, as *maya*, such categories as an “object of perception” are not objective itself. If the whole paradigm is founded on the premonition that sensual world is a delussion, it appears that an aesthetic aspect of a flash, a phenomenon, which undermines the nature of common experience, can be more appealing than aesthetic aspects of the phenomenon of “light”. Summing up, what does “flash” do, is it questions the nature of an experience itself. It interjets our senses into a state of a radical discomfort.

4. A Switch of Perception

It can be obviously expected that a combination of sound and flash can be more effective than the tactic of using them separately. One of artists who achieved some great effects in that matter is Ikeda Ryōji.

¹⁴ Ching – Yu – Chang, *Japońskie pojęcie przestrzeni*, in: *Estetyka Japońska*, ed. Krystyna Wilkoszewska, Kraków, 2001, p.206

¹⁵ Or the „flashes” rather, because it is clear in the context of Kuki’s words, that the author is trying to characterize music as a dynamic activity. The *shamisen* music effect seems also to be build on the sequence of sounds not the only one sound itself.

Ikeda is known from his audio-visual instalations from many years. One, extremely worth to mention in an already decribed context is called: "*The transfinite*". It has got it's exhibition in Armory Park – New York in 2011. It is also striking, how the Japanese performer and composer work has been described in the exhibition catalogue: "*Ikeda creates a visual and sonic environment where visitors are submerged in an extreme illustration of projected and synchronized data. His work uses scale, light, shade, volume, shadow, electronic sounds, and rhythm to flood the senses. In choreographing vast amounts of digital information, Ikeda conjures up a transformative environment in which visitors confront data on a scale that defies comprehension, experiencing the infinite.*"¹⁶ However, "experiencing the infinity" during Ikeda's projections is rather an individual matter, we should not reject the force of the experience generated by his instalation itself.

Let me speak a little bit more about perception and space in the already mentioned matter. The process that has been described by Ching –yu Chang was defined by him as a "*transcending beyond a physical dimension*" of a garden.¹⁷ This statement corelates with a description given by an american pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman, who uses a Richard Danto's term of transfiguration to define a process of switch of perception of a landscape, he witnessed by himself during meditation. The meditation described by an american philosopher took place during his stay in Japan and it was a part of his personal *Zen* practice. Shusterman used to meditate in a *zazen* postion in his master's, *roshi* Ioue Kido, *dojo* with a wonderfull view on a sea bay. It is important to mention that this was a similar practice to stone gardens meditation as both gardens and "Shusterman's bay" arrangement was designed to stimulate percaption in a certain manner. What's significant in this case, *roshi* did not allow Shusterman to feast his eyes on the magnificant sea view as he deliberately put on the beach some old, awfull, rusty oil cans. The effect was also similar to the one that could be acheived in stone garden construction as the oil cans served the function of garden stones. For some time, the American could not understand

¹⁶ Ikeda Ryōji, *The Transfinite*, http://www.armoryonpark.org/programs_events/detail/ryoji_ikeda last acces date: 25.02.2014

¹⁷ Ching – Yu – Chang, *ibidem* s.206

what is the purpose of spoiling such a brilliant landscape by the oil cans as they presented rather low aesthetic value in relation to the perfectly picturesque sea shore. The understanding, as stresses Shusterman, was a kind of a sudden enlightenment. After hours of meditation it just came out “naturally”. In a one moment, ugly, steel oil cans appeared to Shusterman exceedingly beautiful, far even than the sea itself. As he states, he felt as he perceived them for the first time in his life. According to what an american aesthetician wrote, the perceived landscape suddenly transfigured. The experience was followed by a strong awareness that what he perceived as objects before the moment of transfiguration, in fact were rather his own ideas of certain objects than objects. As Shusterman reports in his essay entitled “Art as Religion”, the process was radical and of a metaphysical character: a sudden switch from time – spatial status to spiritual- transcendental one.

There is also another interesting moment in a mentioned essay when Shusterman tries to analyze practices which lead him to a described experience. He makes division between active and passive modes of perception. When perceiving, especially seeing, hearing (distance senses) we generally tend to be active, whereas what Shusterman was doing during his meditation was practicing a passive perception rather. There is in fact an interesting paradox in the naming here. Shusterman defines his practice of meditation as following the “hard-looking mode”: *“..i think there does exist beauty that is difficult to perceive but that is revealed through a kind of disciplined hard-looking”*¹⁸ This apparently seems to be similar to an aesthetic attitude, defined by phenomenological aesthetics for example. Roman Ingarden also stressed the necessity of disciplined perceptive attitude, which involves the intensification of an active perception as it is focused on analyzing the object of perception and aware substantiation of the work of art. In fact, Shusterman rejects such understanding as he states *“my hard-looking could also be understood as hard nonlooking since it was not motivated by a hermeneutic for the true meaning of the object, just as Zen thinking is often described as nonthinking and the fullness of its enlighten-*

¹⁸ Shusterman Richard, *Art and Religion*, http://www.academia.edu/3125517/_Art_and_Religion_, p.12, last access date: 26.02.2014

ment as an emptiness."¹⁹ The described mode of perception could be described as a passive perception mode in this sense, that what we are talking here about is seeing without "looking" and hearing sounds without "listening" to them.

Such attitude seems to be a back side of what Zbigniew Karkowski said. If we create a sound and vision as a pure sound and pure vision, they should be perceived in an appropriate manner. Thus, noise and extreme electronic music do not make sense, however they help set free our senses.

SUMMARY:

Masami Akita, the godfather of Japanese noise music scene once stated that "*Japanese artists use Noise simply as cathartic release without the philosophical underpinnings*". Paradoxically, one of the Japan's greatest philosophers Shuzo Kuki, also used to emphasize a cathartic role of music, treating it as a way of liberating from measurable time and space. In an essay entitled *The Expression of Infinite in Japanese Art*, Kuki highlights his conviction that Japanese arts in general, are guided by the desire of breaking the perspective of time and space.

The paper follows those suggestions in quest to characterize a phenomena of making a specific type of space experience during some modern, Japanese electronic music project's, audio visual performances.

¹⁹ Shusterman Richard, *Art and Religion*, http://www.academia.edu/3125517/_Art_and_Religion_, p.14, last access date: 26.02.2014